

The Escuela Nacional de Folklore Jose Maria Arguedas: music education at a of (de)colonial crossroads in Lima, Peru.

Student: “Mrs Quiroz¹, I have seen players at the tunantada that have marks on their mouthpieces and they pull out or push them in for different songs. Why do they do that? “

Mrs Quiroz: “Well, yes those are the *empiricos*, which is totally fine, but they don’t know what note they are playing.”

This short exchange during an Orquesta Tipica class at the Escuela Nacional de Folklore Jose Maria Arguedas in Lima, struck me for the deep layers of coloniality it projects. The student was asking about a technique that he had witnessed being used by “empirico,” saxophone players at a traditional Orquesta Tipica from the Central Andes (an ensemble that consists of at least 8 saxophones, a violin and a harp). Empirico is a term used in Peruvian and particularly *limeño* musical circles to refer to musicians who have no formal instruction. It is often used in a derogatory way but also simply as a descriptor. I have also heard it used in a self-deprecatory way, as if to say I’m just an “empirico.” The student was referring to a practice among some players to alter the tuning of the instrument by modifying the position of the mouthpiece (and marking the different positions for ease of use) in order to change the key of a piece without altering the fingering (effectively changing the key of the saxophone). When I heard this question, I had a sense that the student must have had a strong connection to these traditional ensembles that allowed him to observe this practice up close. He probably knew already what this was for and was looking to perhaps challenge the knowledge of the teacher in this performance practice or seeking some kind of validation of it within the academic context of this class.

The teacher’s response was that this practice is fine for “empiricos” because they don’t know what “note” they are playing. By that, she meant, that (according to her) these musicians were not aware of how the sounds they were playing mapped onto the Western piano and its nomenclature for distinct bandwidths of the frequency spectrum (C, D, Eb, F#, etc). By implication, she was sending the message to her students that this was fine and respectable for “empiricos”, but that they – as budding professionals- could not afford to remain ignorant as to what “notes” they were playing. In addition, she was implying that as a professional, this practice of altering the standard tuning of the saxophones was not permitted because you should be able to play in any key, without having to change the position of the mouthpiece. I find that this tension between “empirico” and “professional” levels of abstraction and “traditional” and “standardized” performance practices are perfect examples of the crossroads between (de)colonial projects that this institution represents. This tension is of course not unique to the ENSF-JMA and I would argue that it permeates all music education projects, as well as the whole political, economic, cultural and social texture of Peruvian society. The tumultuous history of the school illustrates these tensions in fascinating ways.

The Escuela Nacional de Folklore Jose Maria Argueda, as it is called today, was founded in 1948 by Rosa Elvira Figueroa, a cultural entrepreneur who was looking for ways to “professionalize” and “aestheticize” Peru’s folkloric heritage in order to make it a profitable industry and a canon of performance-ready “national heritage”. At the time, author, academic and cultural promoter Jose Maria

¹ I have changed the names of the participants in order to protect their identity, I have chosen to leave the identity of the institution itself intact, because there is only one national school of this kind in the country and because of the unique history of this institution.

Arguedas – who would later be turned into a symbol of decolonial projects in Peru- was staunchly against the formation of the school. Arguedas, who introduced the idea of folklore in Peru as a discipline and a field of study, was appalled by the work of Figueroa, who he saw as being too liberal in her appropriation and “improvement” upon traditional Andean dances. He argued that an institution dedicated to folklore should serve as a support network for “real” folklore artists, those who had been born within, what he defined as a folkloric tradition, who had learned their skills and repertoire as a matter of absorption and not formal instruction. As a director of the folklore division within the Casa de la Cultura he went on to set up a system of credentials for folklore artists. These artists were examined by a panel of experts who would determine if they were real folklore artists and could obtain a special credential that would grant them access to certain government services.

In 1969, the Peruvian Armed Forces overthrew the democratically elected government and imposed the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (RGAF), a *sui generis* case of a left-wing military government in Latin America. General Velasco, the president of the first stage of the RGAF introduced a sweeping land reform that completely shook the plutocratic and landowner families that had dominated the territory’s economy since colonial times, forever altering the colonial fabric of Peruvian society. That year, the new director of the ENSF became Victoria Santa Cruz Gamarra, a larger-than-life Afro Peruvian radical thinker, performer, composer, author and educator. Together with her brother Nicomedes, Santa Cruz spearheaded the Afro Peruvian revival that swept the imagination of the country in the early 60s and 70s. After centuries of enslavement and over a hundred years of cultural erasure, Black Peruvians were becoming much more culturally prominent in Peru’s imagination thanks, in no small part to the work of the Santa Cruz and other Black intellectuals. Their project was part of a transnational Black liberation network that included the *negritude* movement, the civil rights, African independence movements, etc. Santa Cruz, brought her successful experience as a theater and musical revue producer to bear on the school and the newly formed *Conjunto Nacional de Folklore* (National Folklore Ensemble) which gained international notoriety in the early 70s as it toured internationally.

In 2019 when I conducted my first round of fieldwork, the ENSF-JMA was undergoing yet another wave of change. A 2010 law had granted the school official University status and a 2015 law had required all such institutions to comply with a series of minimum quality requirements or face the loss of their university status or even shut downs. Administrators and professors were struggling to fulfill these requirements while dealing with historical underfunding, a lack of officially certified instructors, and a web of tense relations with the student body and within the faculty.

At the heart of this tumultuous history is a fundamental conflict over the definition of the word “folklore” itself: what is folklore? what isn’t folklore? Can/should folklore be taught and learned in a formal setting? should folklore be a profitable business/profession? should folklore be considered high art? is folklore a means of social change? is it appropriate to use a Western concept to refer to native traditions? Even more confusing is the question of: what is a professional folklore musician/dancer? Seen through the lens of Latin American decolonial theory, these questions are also about race, gender and the reproduction of colonial power structures in the postcolonial period.

Music education has functioned historically as part of the colonial project, first in the evangelizing project of the Catholic Church. After independence from Spain, military music instruction was an important part of the *internal* colonial project of the elite to form a “nation” out of the highly fractured cultural landscape of indigenous communities in the Andes, uncontacted ethnic groups in the

Amazon, the communities of former slaves in the coast and within coastal cities, as well as the massive *mestizo* population that resulted from the connection between these groups and Europeans over four hundred years of colonial rule. At the same time dances, melodies, songs and performance and compositional practices that had persisted in the face of cultural annihilation -as well as new forms of expression that resulted from the transculturation process between social groups- became increasingly categorized as “music” and were seen as a resource for the formation of a national identity. During the first half of the 20th century, many of these forms would increasingly become identified as “folklore” and a canon of dances, melodies and instrumental ensembles began forming. All these strains of musical transmission and music education still prevail and have become complexly entangled in the 21st century.

The purpose of my research at the ENFS-JMA is to try to understand how these colonial entanglements become synthesized in the discursive figure of the “professional folklore performer.” My first hypothesis is that -while this figure might be highly contested and defined in different ways by different agents within the school- it also condenses these tensions between “modernity” and “tradition,” between “rational” and “relational” modes of knowing and being. A second hypothesis is that this figure and the discourse of folklore as it is channeled through the institution of the ENSF-JMA subsumes many cultural forms of cultural production that are part of both ancestral and more contemporary decolonial and/or cultural resistance projects under a hegemonic form of abstraction that further reproduces these colonial structures of power. Through a case study methodology that includes several ethnographic methods, my aim is to unravel some of these moments of tension – like the “marks on the mouthpiece” moment I described in the beginning – in order to unveil how colonial power structures are reproduced (and contested) in the figure of the “folklore professional” and in the practice of teaching and learning “folklore,” within formal institutions like the ENFS-JMA.